

YALI Voices: A natural storyteller airs the facts [audio]

Essan Emile Ako (Kendra Helmer/USAID)



"I was really talkative when I was a child. And I like events," Essan Emile Ako tells the State Department's Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast. That helps to explain the passion he has for his work as managing director of [Radio Arc-en-ciel](#), an urban community radio station in Côte d'Ivoire.

He says one of his biggest influences is his grandfather, whose storytelling prowess transcended an inability to read and write due to a life spent in poverty.

"I never realized that maybe communication was something that was directly related to the tales and stories that the old man was telling me. But when you give it a thought, you see that it is a straight line going from the curiosity to learn, to discover, tales, stories that are really interesting, and then going to radio where you have to, yes, write about fact," Ako said.

Ako's radio station is especially valuable to his community during Côte d'Ivoire's elections, which have sometimes been marked by violence. As a nonpartisan media source, "our role is to make sure that population get the right information before making an informed choice," he said.

Listen to the whole podcast to find out more, including the challenges of sustaining community radio and Ako's efforts to expand public access to it.

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)
"YALI Voices Podcast: Essan Emile Ako"

[MUSIC - GRACE JERRY, "E GO HAPPEN"]

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast, a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative network. My name's Macon Phillips, and I'm so glad you have joined us today.

Before we get started, don't forget to subscribe to the podcast and visit yali.state.gov to stay up to date on all things YALI. My conversation today is with Essan Emile Ako. Essan is an inspiring young leader and popular radio personality in Côte d'Ivoire. He credits his career path to his grandfather, an avid storyteller, who helped raise and heavily influenced him. Essan is especially passionate about promoting free and fair elections in Côte d'Ivoire. He's also working hard to expand public access to radio programming over the internet.

Now let's jump right into my interview with Essan Emile Ako.

So welcome, Ako, it's great to have you here.

ESSAN AKO: Thank you so much, Macon. It's really great to meet you for the first time. I've been receiving mail from you, from the YALI Network, for the great work you have been doing. We are

really grateful, and I'm happy to meet you and to take part in this podcast.

MR. PHILLIPS: Great. Well, it's been a lot of fun. And I apologize for all the emails. We just get really excited, you know.

MR. AKO: Yeah, I know.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you're in radio, and now you're trying to steer your work in radio to support peaceful elections. But let me start a little bit earlier. What was your first memories, your first experience with radio?

MR. AKO: Well, thank you. My very first experience in radio was in May 2008. By then, I was a student of second year at the University of Côte d'Ivoire. And I was just in the barber shop when I heard an advertising on the radio, on local radio, of our district that they are recruiting new program hosts. I had never been into a studio, a radio studio, before. But I just decided to apply because when I was in secondary school, I used to just act like an MC of some ceremonies.

And so I decided to apply, and then I went, I asked for information, what should I bring? They say, you should bring a show proposal. They asked me to present my first program as a test. So I read the story of Nelson Mandela for about five minutes in English. And then some listeners called to say that's really great, we need an English program on that radio station. So you should take this guy. And that's how I started as a talk show host.

MR. PHILLIPS: Now if you had gone back to yourself and secondary school, or even younger, and said, guess what you're going to be doing in a few years, would you have been surprised?

MR. AKO: Well, not really. Not really, because I was really talkative when I was a child. And I like events. Appearing in events and always trying to have my say, trying to contribute. And this was a really part of me. But actually, I really wanted to become a pharmacist. That after I chose that, I don't know exactly why, but maybe I was going to do work in radio, in communication is a really great and fun so far.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you're always talkative, always storytelling. I know you mentioned that your grandfather was a big influence on you in that way. Can you describe that a little bit?

MR. AKO: Exactly. As it goes back to my way early childhood, the '90s. I was born in 1987, and then in 1992 I started going to school. Then I discovered my grandfather, whom I took my father, because I never knew that I had another father somewhere, because my father had divorced with my mother. And then this old man would — could not even walk even, because he was too old, really nurtured me with his own experience, always telling me his stories and tales from our cultural background. And from his experience, what he had done in Côte d'Ivoire, even in the sub-region, in West Africa. Although he was illiterate, he had traveled, and at that time they used to walk wherever they wanted to go. So they told me to the whole of these stories, and I was so close to him that I couldn't even relate to my age-mates. And then after this, is something like a fish in water, I was to become the future, and what I'm doing now.

MR. PHILLIPS: So walk me through that. Your grandfather, and stories, and that experience really led you to what you're doing now. What do you see in what you're doing now that's connected with, sort of, the values he communicated to you?

MR. AKO: I never realized that maybe communication was something that was directly related to the tales and stories that the old man was telling me. But when you give it a thought, you see that it is a straight line going from the curiosity to learn, to discover, tales, stories that are really interesting, and then going to radio where you have to, yes, write about fact. There are sometimes, also, you have to be imaginative. To imagine things, and then tell their story. So I think that's a whole lot of these have really contributed to what I'm doing now.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so let's talk a little bit more about what you're doing now. So you're not only in radio. You also manage radio. You're in the business of radio, trying to think about how radio can not only be interesting, but can actually be sustainable.

So talk to me a little bit about the challenges of being involved in radio right now in Côte d'Ivoire.

MR. AKO: Well, thank you. Radio is such a great, amazing, interesting business for one to be in. Unfortunately, for community radio stations, the low-end policies around that are not really clear, so there are people in the radio stations that don't have a status. And most of the workers in the community radio stations are volunteers. Volunteers, they are not paid, they just work there for their passion, and then they are obliged to look for money somewhere else.

So this is one of the biggest challenges. There is no clear policy. There are some requirements. For example, a radio station cannot be involved in partisan politics. It is true this avoids using politicians using radio stations to manipulate the people, and to create wars in crises. It's good.

But at the same time, this prevents radio stations from having income and resources, and this prevents our actions on the ground. On the other side, also, we are not allowed to do commercials as a commercial radio stations. So our commercial actions are really limited to about 20 percent of our whole budget.

So if you cannot run adverts to a certain level, you cannot deal with politicians, then our sources of income are really limited. And we have to rely on donors, let's say, NGOs, local NGOs, international NGOs. But the whole of these structures, institutions, have their own agendas, have their own programs. So if what you're doing does not fall into what they want to achieve, or if what they want to achieve does not have a communication component, then radio stations have to just struggle to just live.

But we could do more if the policy was very clear, the staff in the radio station had a clear status, and had a career — where you can have careers in community radio stations.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you describe a challenge. And so now tell me, moving forward, how you're addressing that. What are you planning to do about that?

MR. AKO: Well, in addressing these challenges, you have to be a really creative and imaginative. We live in a community of 1.5 million people. And these area is said to be the poorest urban area in Côte d'Ivoire. So we are confronted by many challenges. In trying to address some of these issues, we may create opportunities.

For example, during the election in Côte d'Ivoire in 2015, the radio stations decided to promote free and fair elections. This was our goal that help when we go into the street, go into communities, and organize with communities so that we come together around the table to discuss the benefits of free and fair elections.

We did not have funds. We wrote some grant proposals, and fortunately for us, we met the USAID office for transition initiatives. They had a program called CT2, Côte d'Ivoire Transition Initiative, so

they decided to just support us. And they gave us a grant of about \$48,000 that helped us to promote free and fair elections for eight months.

And also, we tried to create programs that will attract local businesses or sponsors that would help us. So we have our ways to think about the strategies, and to refine our strategies.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so now you're trying to move forward, and use these community radio stations even more to promote free and peaceful elections. Can you walk us through what the future looks like? What are some of the exciting things that you're looking forward to?

MR. AKO: Well, in the coming months, there will be two very important elections in Côte d'Ivoire. The legislative, where we are going to elect our members of the Parliament. And then there will be a referendum about the amendment of our constitution. So these are really great moments.

And if you look at the past story of Côte d'Ivoire, you will see that election time have been times of struggle, times of fighting. So we are going, also, to promote free and fair elections at this local level, and also inform the population about the upcoming referendum. With that being, we don't know exactly what is going to be modified in the constitution. But as a community, as a community radio station, or a community organization, our role is to make sure that population get the right information before making an informed choice.

Then in trying to move forward, there are many challenges, as I mentioned earlier. So in trying to solve some of these challenges, then we could come up with opportunities, grant opportunities, to deal with some more on these problems.

MR. PHILLIPS: And then anytime we talk about the future, and moving forward, inevitably, we talk about the impact of technology, social media. So as someone who's in a medium that historically been pretty basic, you've got the antennas, and radio receivers, and all that, I'm sure that you're also exploring the digital side of your work. Can you talk a little about the intersection of technology and the current business you're doing with community radio?

MR. AKO: Well, yeah. The development of technology, in the beginning, some of our elders, in radio and television, saw it as a competition between internet, and the radio, and television. But our generation, we are fortunate enough to learn that the internet is not coming to compete against to the radios, that we can use internet to further reach a larger audience.

So we, in the recent past, we built a website, and then we tried to broadcast, live-streaming online, just for us to have a broader audience. Because one thing about community radio stations in Côte d'Ivoire is that their reach is limited. There is a regulation that we should not go beyond, sometimes, 10-kilometer radius, or 60-kilometer radius, like in our case.

But with the internet, there's no limit. You can have it everywhere. So it's really fantastic and wonderful. Once we finished our website, the problem we were confronted with was, in fact, two problems. The cost of internet, and how quick internet is. So these two problems prevented ourselves from being really streaming online. So after that we took our website down.

But our project is not done. We are learning ways to continue that. But we have a presence on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, and we even intend to be build a mobile app, application, for young people to be able to receive our radio station and some of the recorded programs on the

mobile phones.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK. So we'll wrap it up with three questions we like to ask everyone just to kind of see what the different answers. So you're someone who's been in radio for a while, focused on elections, really got it all put together. What's something about you that would surprise people?

MR. AKO: That's a question, but let me just try to say that I come from a very poor family. Poor, but have always said you don't need to be a billionaire to be happy. Although I was poor, my grandfather was poor, my family was better. I was not unhappy when I was a child, because of the love that I was in need, I got it from my grandfather and from my mother, also.

And so when I started going to school, I was fortunate to have my stepfather taking up all the charges for my education. And then when I went to a secondary school myself, I started having some problems. So while I was in secondary school, we tried to go to work in farms just to have yams, some cassava, some bananas. And sometimes some money for us to continue our education.

And this continued to when I entered university, where I used to sell booklets. I was out of the classrooms while my mates were in the classroom. Following courses, I was outside, and I was selling English-speaking booklets. So I used to do sell these, and by the end of the day, I could have up to \$10. That's enough for me for the week.

And then for the courses, once my mates come from the classroom, I used the courses, I made a photocopy, and I'd read through. And once I have a topic, I go online, on the internet, I bring some courses about this course that have been done because I did not have explanation of a teacher. And at the end of the day, I succeeded to pass all my credits up to the master.

MR. PHILLIPS: Man, that's amazing. So you would be outside selling these little books for next to nothing, make \$10 worth of money out of it —

MR. AKO: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: Find your friends. Photocopy their notes. Study that. Go online. Watch the courses on the topic. And then still pass the test.

MR. AKO: Exactly, exactly. Yes, this is what I did. And I did it for almost five years, when I was at university.

MR. PHILLIPS: Sounds to me like whatever you put your mind to, you're going to figure out. It seems that it's pretty impressive. So let me ask another question, then.

MR. AKO: Ok.

MR. PHILLIPS: Are you a morning person, or are you a night owl?

MR. AKO: Yes, I mostly work better in the night. So I can stay up in the night, up to maybe 3 o'clock, 3 AM, working. But in the morning, it's really difficult for me to wake up and work. So yes, when I wake up, I have to do some sport, wash, then go to where I'm going. But I really stay late in the night.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK, that's great. My final question is if you could ask Barack Obama a question,

what would your question for him be.

MR. AKO: You know when you look up the story of President Obama, some 20 years ago, he went to Kenya where he was met only by his sister at the airport. And we saw the pictures where his grandmother was living, and we even saw pictures of him carrying a bag in all of this.

And then, 20 years later, the same person goes back to the same country, but this time it's not only his sister who came to meet him, but the head of state, the whole people, and even the whole Africa, came to meet him. Then my question is, what are the three most important principles that guided him from that time where his sister only met him, up to this time, where he cannot go anywhere unnoticed. This is my question to President Obama.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's a great question. And within that question, I think you make some really important points. And certainly one of them is that he has received quite a lot of support from people across Africa, including a lot of young leaders. And I think that's part of what makes YALI so special, is it's certainly a relationship between President Obama, but the United States generally, and young leaders across Africa, like you.

And I really appreciate you making time to share your story with us today.

MR. AKO: Thank you so much.

MR. PHILLIPS: I want to thank everyone from YALI, YALI Network, for tuning in today. And we will be back with another interview soon. Thanks, everyone. Have a great day.

Essan's an incredible example of the power of perseverance. There's no doubt he's put the work in to achieve his goals and succeed. Thank you to Essan for sharing your story with us. If you'd like to get in touch with him, you can find them on Facebook under Essan Emile Ako. That's E-S-S-A-N E-M-I-L-E A-K-O.

He's also on Twitter. His handle there is @seniorako. Get ready for my French pronunciation. His radio station is Radio Arc-en-ciel, and can be found on Facebook, as well. That's A-R-C E-N C-I-E-L.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast. Join the YALI Network at yali.state.gov, and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, produced by the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State, and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. Government. Thanks, everyone.
